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ABSTRACT

Retention has been the answer to the problem of what to do with students who are unprepared for the academic and social demands of the next grade. Studies contend that children view retention as punishment and experience emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness when not promoted. Retention or nonpromotion can be defined as the practice of requiring a child to repeat a particular grade or requiring a child of appropriate chronological age to delay entry to kindergarten or first grade. This study (n=36) was designed to investigate the long-term impact of being retained in kindergarten or first grade on seventh and eighth grade students. The hypothesis was that retained students would score significantly lower than their nonretained peers on academic and self-esteem measures. Academic achievement was measured by the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) and self-esteem was measured by the Self-Esteem Inventory School Form. Results supported the hypothesis that retained students had significantly lower academic achievement and self-esteem scores that the promoted pupils. Contains 12 references. (JBJ)

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THE IMPACT OF EARLY GRADE RETENTION ON THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM OF SEVENTH AND EIGHT GRADE STUDENTS

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by

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This study was completed in partial fulfillment for a Masters of Science degree in Psychology and a Credential in School Psychology from California State University, Fresno.

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THE IMPACT OF EARLY GRADE RETENTION ON THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM OF SEVENTH AND EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this presentation is to submit evidence that retention as an intervention is not beneficial to students who are experiencing difficulties in school. This session will consist of a discussion concerning a retention study that examined the long-term impact of nonpromotion in kindergarten or first grade on seventh and eighth grader's academic achievement and self-esteem.

Retention Overview

By the end of the Civil War (1861-1865), most urban community schools had organized their pupils into grades based on the chronological age of the student, with goals indicated for each grade level. Within the next 70 years, rural area schools also instated this type of structure (Holmes & Matthew, 1984). It was with this graded system that the issue of retention first emerged. Retention became an answer to the problem of what to do with students who were unprepared for the academic and social demands of the next grade. Retention or nonpromotion, used interchangeably, can be defined as "the practice of requiring a child to repeat a particular grade or requiring a child of appropriate chronological age to delay entry to kindergarten or first grade" (Dawson, Rafoth, & Carey, 1990 p.138).

Concern over the possible negative effects of nonpromotion was expressed in the 1930s and since then the debate over whether retention is harmful or helpful for children has become the topic of many research articles. Jackson (1975) stated that much of the research done on retention is flawed and of poor quality. After examining 44 studies, he concluded that those professionals who retain students in a grade do so without valid research evidence.

Smith and Shepard (1990) estimated that every year approximately 2.4 million American students are held back in school at an annual cost to the taxpayer of $10 billion. This statistic was based on an annual retention rate of 5 to 7 percent of public school children (about 2 children in every classroom of 30) and a per pupil cost of $4,051. Dawson and Rafoth (1991) found that retention was supported by 74% of school administrators, 65% of teachers, and 59% of parents. With such a large percentage of people advocating nonpromotion, it is of the utmost importance that not just intuitive knowledge, but scientific knowledge be taken into consideration when making a decision to retain a pupil.

Study

The present study was designed to investigate the long-term impact of being retained in kindergarten or first grade on seventh and eighth grade students. The hypothesis specified that the retained students would score significantly lower than their nonretained peers on academic and self-esteem measures. Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985)

noted that long-term follow up (i.e., greater than two to three years) of children participating in retention studies is rare.

Academic achievement was defined by the national percentile (NP) scores on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS). The CTBS scores were chosen because of their supported valuable use in Smith and Shepard's (1990) retention study. CTBS scores are also widely employed by many school districts as they are considered to be an accurate measure of pupils functioning levels.

Self-esteem was defined by Coopersmith (1990) as "the evaluation a person makes and customarily maintains with regard to him or herself; that is, overall self-esteem is an expression of approval or disapproval, indicating the extent to which a person believes him or herself competent, successful, significant, and worthy" (p. 2). The Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI), developed by Stanley Coopersmith, was employed because of its high internal consistency reliability factors ranging from .87 (fifth grade) to .92 (fourth grade) (Kimball, 1973).

Methodology

Subjects in this investigation consisted of 36 seventh and eighth grade students who were assigned to one of two groups: (a) 18 subjects that had been retained in kindergarten or first grade and had never been in a Special Day Class (SDC) placement (RET group), and (b) 18 subjects that had progressed normally through the grades and had never been recommended for retention (NRET group). The two groups were matched for gender, grade level, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Student participation was strictly voluntary and permission forms were signed by the students' legal guardians.

The materials used to measure academic achievement included the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) Forms U and V national percentiles from the Reading Total, Mathematics Total, Language Total, and Total Battery. However, the Total Battery was used as the main variable. CTBS Forms U and V were nationally standardized on approximately 240,00 students during the week of April 27 through May 1, 1981.

The Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) (Coopersmith, 1990) School Form was used to examine self-esteem. The SEI School Form has 58 questions that are answered either "Like Me" or "Not Like Me." The School Form has six categories: (a) General Self, (b) Social Self-Peers, © Home-Parents, (d) School-Academic, (e) Total, and (f) Lie Scale. The Total score was used as the Self-Esteem measure for this study. The SEI took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Main Results

The Retained group (RET) and the Nonretained group (NRET) were compared on the CTBS Total Battery and the SEI Total Battery using independent *t* tests set at the .05 level of significance. The findings revealed that there was a significant difference between the Retained and the Nonretained groups on both scales. That is, the CTBS Total for the Retained group ($\underline{M} = 35.33$) was found to be significantly

lower than the Nonretained group ($\underline{M}$ = 74.61), $\underline{t}$ = -5.26, df = 34, $\underline{p}$ < .05). Furthermore, the SEI Total for the Retained group ($\underline{M}$ = 63.00) was found to be significantly lower than the Nonretained group ($\underline{M}$ = 75.56), t = -2.00, df = 34, $\underline{p}$ < ,05). (See Comparison Table insert.)

Discussion

The results of this study supported the hypothesis that the retained students had significantly lower academic achievement and self-esteem scores than the promoted pupils. Thus, reinforcing the statement that retention as an intervention is ineffective and that educators who believe they are "helping" students by holding them back are really making a false assumption.

These results concurred with one of the first longitudinal study's on retention ever conducted. Kamii and Weikart (1963) found that retention does not benefit students in the long run. Thirty years later, there is still little proof that nonpromotion is advantageous to pupils. In fact, studies such as Smith and Shepard's (1987) contend that children view retention as punishment and experience emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness when not promoted.

Possibly one of the most damaging aspects of retention is the drop out rate that occurs after the nonpromotion practice has taken place. Dawson and Rafoth (1991) reported that being held back once increases a pupil's likelihood of quitting school by 30%. Even more staggering is the fact that being held back twice makes dropping out of school a virtual certainty. School administrators, teachers,

counselors, and parents need to give this data careful consideration when making nonpromotional decisions which will seriously affect a student's life in the years to come.

Alternatives to Retention

Dawson, Rafoth, and Carey (1990) and Smith and Shepard (1987) have presented recommendations for other interventions considered to be more suitable methods for aiding children without succumbing to the practice of retention. These alternatives to nonpromotion include remedial instruction, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, after-school programs, individualized instructional programs within the regular education classroom, and increased parent involvement in remediation (Rafoth, Dawson, & Carey, 1991).

The need for students to confront new concepts, new teachers, new subject matter, and new opportunities are reasons why individuals should not be retained. They are also reasons why retention usually fails. The nonpromotion of students eliminates the possibilities of fresh learning experiences and at times can be more harmful than helpful to pupils (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

A Comparison of Retained and Nonretained Students on Collected Total Batteries and Subscales

	Retained		Nonretained		
	M	SD	M	SD	T Test[a]
CTBS TOTAL	35.33	24.43	74.61	20.16	-5.26*
SEI TOTAL	63.00	13.66	75.56	13.66	-2.00*
General	17.33	6.28	19.22	4.39	-1.05
Social	5.50	1.79	6.67	1.53	-2.10
Home	5.00	2.50	5.94	2.10	-1.23
School	3.67	2.25	5.94	2.04	-3.18
Reading Total	34.83	26.62	71.55	22.18	-4.50**
Language Total	37.56	23.17	72.44	20.62	-4.77**
Math Total	37.72	30.73	78.33	17.94	-4.84**

[a]df = 34
*$p < .05$, two-tailed. **$p < .001$, two-tailed

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